



ON STRIKE
TILL 3

BY GRANT BALFOUR

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GRANT BALFOUR

Author of

"Canada My Home and Other Poems"

"The Fairy School of Castle Frank"

&c., &c.



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WHERE UNION DWELT

Beside the deep ravine the cottage stood,
O'erlooking elm and willow, beech and birch,
In growth profuse and wild o'er shady stream;
And viewing cedar, oak and towering pine
On yonder crest aglow with light. How grand
The vision in the greenness of the spring,
When birds of blue and scarlet vestments come;
The greater glory of the summer time,
When twinkling wings outvie the rarest flowers;
Or ripeness of the fall, when richest green
And gold and red in mass of tapestry
Delight the eye.

But now the scene is white,
Resplendent white. No miser hand hath swept
The vale and heights but Nature bountiful
Of beauty dazzling pure, the season's own.
The spotless path below, meandering midst
O'erhanging boughs and drooping plants enwrapped
In feathered snow, a reverend scene, appears
As if for angels formed, who came to walk
This sacred aisle to worship winter's God.
The lofty pines that grace the other crest,
Enrobed in sparkling splendor, raise their heads
In solemn awe to yonder jewelled dome,
And offer praise to Him whose temple bright
Holds earth and sky.

Beneath a frosted birch,
Lit up to brilliance by the burnished moon,
The shingle cottage stood, a humble home.
The labour of the day was done. The lamp
Within sent out its yellow rays athwart
The silver snow and on the well-washed sheets
And other things that hung on lines and told
The woman's calling. Work, from dawn of day
Till dark, with poor reward.

CHRISTMAS EVE

'Twas Christmas Eve.

The mother and her little boy (his name
Was David Annandale) sat down to read
And converse hold before they sought repose.
A widow young, with richest auburn hair,
Bright hazel eyes 'neath finely arching brows,
Teeth of pearl, and sympathetic smile
Most sweet. No wonder that her child, a lad
Of six, with raven hair and ruddy cheeks,
Should find in her alone his heart's desire,
His reigning thought, the perfect one. His eyes
Lovelit no blemish saw in careworn looks.

Her stories, read and told with girlish zeal,
Of beaver, bear and wolf, and jet black squirrel,
But, best of all, of smiling Santa Claus,
Aroused an interest intense. The deep
Ravine itself and other themes all passed
Beneath her spell. And he, tho' entertained,
Was also purified and lifted up.
"My mother, dear," he said, "When I'm a man,
I'll work and work for you, and buy a castle
And a carriage; you will be a lady,
And nevermore be tired."

Tired himself at last,
His eyelids fell. He dreamed a moment deep,
Then wide awoke and starting up he wept,
And as he sobbed he said, "I've seen my kitten
In the cold ravine. Oh, let it in !"
This was a kitten lost a while before,
A creature in his heart as much as treasure
Real or ideal fills the heart
Of any ardent man. He ever longed
And hoped for its return. And every night
The door was opened and the yearning call
Went out into the empty air. And every
Night he saw the lost one's dish supplied,
Which morning found untouched. The mother did
Her best to stay his tears, and as she bent,
And tucked him warm in bed she said that maybe
Santa Claus would bring another kitten.
"Tie a great big stocking, mother ; make it
Open wide and warm." She did so, kissed him,
And he closed his eyes.

One hand alone,
Would fill that empty stocking, nor forget.
A friend or neighbor would come later on,
But David's eyes when morning came would look
On emptiness, save for mother's hand. Nay, stay,—
At midnight, yea, at midnight, when the moon
Was still a silver lamp, a creature poor,
Benighted, wandered to the cottage door.
Ill-treated, cold, too sick to cry, it looked
With wistful eyes beneath the fastened door.
Then turned and went aside and trembling climbed
The sloping birchen tree and reached the roof.
Adown the chimney peered, then slowly crept,
Then fell. It lay upon the hearth a time.

But lured, it lapped the milk, and, strengthened, strove
To climb into the little sleeper's cot.
It strove but failed, and, guided by a gentle
Hand, it fell at last into the open
Stocking, head above, and finding comfort,
Softly purred and slept.

Ah, sleeping boy,
Thou dreamest not the joy awaiting thee—
The empty place within thy heart shall soon
Be filled, thy grief assuaged, thy hot tears dried.
'Tis little value—but 'tis much to thee—
Because thy love is wrapped up there, and love
Is value's measure in the heart of rich
And poor.

The boy awoke and rubbed his eyes.
The sun had risen o'er the grand ravine,
A silver scene, and sent its slanting rays
Of gold beneath the blind, across the cot.
He waited not, but crept along and looked
Below. Two eyes looked up. A moment mutual
Magnetized, transfixed ! He drew the creature
From its woollen bed, he kissed it,—pressed it
To his cheek—and wept for joy. The mother
Woke. The midnight "gift" was seen and gladly
Welcomed home while David slept, and now
She also wept for joy. No home was happier
On that Christmas morn. No gift was costlier
Than the gift that meant the wasted worthless
Waif's return.



"Magnetized "

THE LURKING FOE

Till early spring (too soon),
While David went to school, and learned well,
The widow bravely labored on 'mid frost
And snow and storm, thro' strain of overwork
And worse. Inhaled, mayhap, from matter bad,
Close-handled in her calling (who can trace
The lurking venom foe?) the wasting plague
Had found a cruel lodgment in her breast.
"One hope remains," the kind physician said—
Who made no charge for visits not a few—
" 'Tis institutional treatment where the air
Is light and pure, where food is plentiful,
And rest abounds."

The parting wrench was sore.
The mother hid her grief and tears, and smiled,
But David wept without restraint. A farming
Couple sympathetic offered refuge
For awhile, and when he went away
(His kitten in a basket 'neath his arm),
His heart was heavy—for the sun was down,
The world was dark.

But five months' treatment free
Was great and good, and David's mother seemed
To be restored to health, for strength was there
And color beautiful. 'Twas not enough,
Tho' all that could be given, that other waiting
Sufferers might have a chance to live.
With rest at home the healing work begun
Would one day be complete.

Ye men of wealth,
And all that generous give, with all that halt,
Herein your golden opportunity
Doth lie. A home you have prepared for them
That leave the prison cell, and this is well.
But what awaits the convalescent widow
And the orphan, fighting off the wasting plague?
Suspicion—dread—a refuge craved for vainly
Here and there—a battle hopeless, lost.
Awake, awake! Oh, give the shelter sure
A child would give to any famished waif !
Oh, wake, compassion, wake !

When David, big
With joy, returned, the wind sang in the trees,
The flowers, red and white, a welcome smiled,
The cottage seemed to be a prince's home,
And mother in her loveliness a queen,
While in the mother's eyes her child appeared
As if a shepherd lad, he looked so strong,
So lithe, and ruddy. But the only flock
That David had consisted of a kitten,
Now a cat renowned of tiger-stripe
And fat. And once again the cottage-home
Gave foretaste of the other, deathless, pure,
And glad, for love was there.

With quenchless hope
The happy widow bravely bent her shoulders
To the yoke again. She had her boy
To live for, work for, love, and he would be
A man some day, and strong, when she would lean
On him as he had leaned on her. And yet
The yoke was heavy, and grew heavier
As vigour waned. In spite of hope and will

She craved for rest. Or even if the wage
Were better, labour could be lessened
And give more of rest.

ON STRIKE

One day some workmen
Struck for better pay. And David wondered
What it meant to strike. "What is it, mother?—
Do they hit the men that give them work?"
The mother smiled. "No, no, my child, they merely
Rest or cease from work to force their masters
Into giving better pay to get them
Back to work." A happy thought now seized him—
"Oh, mother, strike, and then the people sure
Will give you better pay." The mother smiled,
But sighed and said, "My darling boy, if I
Should strike, a score of women poor are ready,
Even glad, to take my place, perchance for less."
The boy was disappointed, and his heart
Was sad.

But "strike," that odd word strike, as meaning
Rest from work, or stopping work, clung fast
To David's mind. Apart from better pay
He thought that something good remained, and so
At night, the last thing done before he slept,
The boy would often take his board, a blackboard
Big, and chalk in letters large and white—
"On strike till 7," "On strike till 6," "On strike
Till 5," according as his mother's work
Required, or strength could stand. The metal clock,
A loud alarm, was also wound and set.
At this the mother always smiled, but when
Her treasure's eyes were closed in sleep she wept.

She dared not bend and kiss those cherub lips.
His lovely face grew paler day by day,
And dread, an awful dread, laid hold of her.
And she herself was wasting swift and sure—
The candle flame was burning low.

ANOTHER CHRISTMAS

Two nights, not more, before the Christmas eve,
A heap of things for washing lay against
The wall. Alas, at any time too great,
The present task might break the weary back,
But Christmas need was pressing and the labour
Must be done. (Oh, spare that wasted frame !
Hear, O Lord, the widow's cry !)

The weary, yet the watchful boy,
His blackboard took and wrote in letters big
And urgent, seeming charged with meaning strange.
And the clock's alarum was set. And now
On bended knee beside his mother's knee
He spoke his simple prayer, pleading lastly
That his mother might have better wages
And have rest. And, oh, the mother's heart
Went with him, with himself before the throne,
Forgetful, ay entirely, of herself.
A wild temptation seized her. She would clasp,
Yea, fiercely hug, that wasted angel-body
To her breast, and kiss those guileless, beauteous,
Sweetest lips. Alas ! she knew the worst
Had come—those eyes, uplifted, hollow, shining,
Spoke of death. And why refrain ? She would not,
Yea, she drank the cup of pleasure to the full.
The child was glad, and went to rest,
A smile of heaven on his lips.

And now the mother satisfied, as one
With strongest wine, rose up, and ope'd the door.
She looked abroad a moment, then went out
Into the silent air. The deep ravine
Was glorious white. The mighty pines were robed
As if prepared to sing in heaven's choir
On earth, when strong the northern tempest blew.
The widow, vigour getting for a little
From the frosty air, admired the scene,
And lifting up her eyes to sparkling worlds
Above, she felt assured, though human help
And pity wholly failed, that somewhere, sometime,
There was plenteous rest.

And yet she thanked
And praised the Power that good and evil gave,
For one brief cup of pleasure, if no more—
Her pleasure in her darling boy. "Take him,
O Lord, whatever portion mine."

The tension loosed,
The stricken widow turned, yet ere she turned
She scanned the northern shore of brilliant night,
And, lo, a mountain mass of tempest clouds
Lined up for battle with the sleeping south.
The woman, fearless, smiled as if in kinship
With the coming storm.

But having struggled, spoken,
Pleaded strong, her transient vigour gone,
She stumbled to the door and entered in.
Beside the bed, she saw the letters written
On the board, as if the sacred writing
On the wall. She saw the slender lovely hand
Exposed that wrote them, and she bowed and kissed it,
But she could not weep.

Ere midnight came,
The child awoke, disturbed, and anxious said,
"Oh, mother dear, what is that awful sound?"
"My darling, 'tis the sighing of the wind
Among the pines." But swifter sped the tempest,
Swifter, and the pines—they bowed their heads
Before the blast and sang. The cedars high
And oaks together answered back in song,
And louder, louder, as if thunder grand,
The tempest bell of music rang. The boy
Awoke again, and feebly cried—"Oh, mother,
I'm afraid—what is that dreadful sound?"
"My darling, fear not, 'tis the voice of God—
He leads the choir. And he remembers you
And me." "Oh, mother, take me in beside you.
I'm afraid of God, but Jesus"—Here he stopped.
He struggled till he got in part athwart
The cot. And as his wearied head sank down
He whispered faintly, and there came a broken
Answer, whispering—"Near me, nearer, darling"—
That was all.

The storm, the mother's music,
But the child's affright, attained its height.
Then sudden rang the loud alarm. But
They heard it not.

* * * * *

There was once a manger,
Once a cross, and both by man despised.
But God hath both exalted high. And once
A lonely cottage lowly, overlooked
By men. But God on it had mercy.
Tho' He seemed to be in wrath.



"The morning saw her come"

Three wise men

Did not come, nor one. A child, a girl
With golden hair and gray-blue laughing eyes,
A furtive playmate of the boy, with stress
Walked through the spotless wreaths of snow. The morning
Saw her come, when all was still. No lock
Debarred her, and she entered, having knocked.
She saw the writing on the blackboard big,
Against the wall, in trembling chalk—

“ ON STRIKE TILL 3 ”

And duly signed by David Annandale.
She saw the mother's snow-white face upturned
To heaven. She saw the raven locks of David
Strewn upon her breast. And saw his face—
'Twas also white as snow. The tragic scene
Was quickly seen. She stood amazed a moment,
Then approached, uncertain, all atremble,
And she softly pressed her playmate's brow.
The chill of death went thro' her, and she gave
A piercing cry and fled.

Of Christmas Day,
Next day but one, the pretty child had come
To speak and childlike tell of something fine
She was to bring. But that great day of countless
Happy homes would see the cottage empty.
Nature, nature's God, in mercy stayed
The stricken widow's ill-paid, weary labour.
She had gone on strike, as David said,
And she had taken her darling with her.

